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Straight Talk About the City Economy

Mayor Giuliani is trying to stimulate economic growth by attracting the Republican National Convention, fostering tourism and cutting the hotel tax. Ironically, the thousands of participants in the Gay Games and the march for gay rights on June 26 will probably generate far more economic activity than any political convention. It's time to recognize the importance of the gay and lesbian community to the economic life of New York City.

During the past half-century, gays have played a vital role in the most dynamic sectors of our economy - media, fashion and entertainment, as well as in advanced business services such as finance, real estate and law. Although the contribution of gays and lesbians is difficult to quantify, this city depends on its gay citizens to generate a large share of the ideas and innovations that produce wealth and enhance our quality of life. Can anyone imagine where New York City would be if we had not provided a supportive milieu for Andy Warhol's vision, Michael Bennett's creativity, or Perry Ellis' sartorial flair?

The advertising world understands that gay and lesbian households are an important part of the consumer market - witness the ads for IKEA and Banana Republic - but public officials have been slower to recognize that the gay community is more than just another constituency to be catered to; rather, it is one of the city's key economic assets.

For most politicians and too many New Yorkers, the gay community is seen only through the prism of the AIDS epidemic, and as a drain on the municipal budget. Although New York City has 20 percent of the nation's AIDS cases, gay men have been remarkably successful in slowing the spread of this disease in their community. Last year, drug users, not homosexuals, accounted for more than half of all the new adult AIDS cases diagnosed here.

Nonetheless, AIDS has ravaged the city's gay population. As a result, the local economy has been hurt by the loss of talent and organizational know-how. There is an economic as well as a moral rationale for government support in the fight against AIDS. If the future of the city's economy is to be linked to growth in tourism, culture and design-related industries, then fighting AIDS is as good for the economy as cutting taxes. Many businesses and universities now include domestic partners in their health insurance plans, not out of altruism but because they understand the value of skilled labor, both straight and gay. The mayor's wise decision to continue funding the Division of AIDS Services should be regarded as an investment in the city's capacity to foster creativity and innovation.

During the past few years, the gay and lesbian community has received much notoriety as a result of conflicts over the "Rainbow" curriculum and the right of the Irish Lesbian and Gay

Organization to march in the St. Patrick's Day parade. These cultural wars - while compelling - should not divert us from the economic-development imperatives facing the city.

For New York, tolerance and respect for gays and lesbians must be considered a fundamental element in policies to improve the city's business climate. The gay and lesbian community - like some ethnic groups - maintains separate social institutions and recreational areas while simultaneously participating in all sectors of the city economy. Industries that generate jobs based on new ideas and innovations are essential to the city's future, and without the gay and lesbian community, those industries and our city cannot thrive.

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